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JONATHAN MARSHALL**An opposing view****Secrets weren't vital;
no action is needed**

OAKLAND, Calif. — Soviet spies can steal our codes, our radar blueprints, and our naval secrets, but they can't rob of us of our common sense. Only Congress and the administration can do that.

A flurry of highly publicized espionage cases — most notoriously that of the Walker family spies who allegedly penetrated the U.S. Navy for the KGB — has Congress and the Pentagon jumping blindly.

"Do something" has become the order of the day. Officials and legislators vie for media attention as they maneuver to appear in command of the situation. But we may have more reason to fear their over-reactions than the spying itself.

No one even knows whether Soviet espionage is any more pervasive or effective today than it was 5, 10, or 20 years ago. Indeed, as Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger pointed out, "The fact that these things are surfacing can be attributed perhaps to greater enforcement efforts."

That uncertainty hasn't stopped Congress from pushing the death penalty for spies and sweeping lie detector tests for Pentagon personnel. Whether the death penalty will really deter anyone, or whether polygraphs will bag the innocent but clear the practiced guilty, few seem to care. Only the symbolism appears to matter.

Nor does anyone have a clear idea of just how vital the compromised secrets really were. Many doubtless had a

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limited-time value. Codes and operational measures have been or will be changed. Any marginal advantage the Soviets might gain must be vastly overshadowed by the certain catastrophe that would overcome them in the event of an all-out superpower conflict.

The Pentagon's real secret is how few of its classified documents deserve to remain secret. The 20 million documents stamped secret every year include such gems as the Navy's justification for its 1986 budget request, with the classified assessment that the services' "compensation and quality of life improvements must be competitive in the job market."

With so many mundane matters under wraps, neither the Defense Department nor its contractors can function without giving millions of employees some kind of clearance.

The USA's strength, technological as well as political, lies in our openness, not in our ability to compete with Moscow secret-for-secret. We hold the greatest lead over the Soviets in areas like civilian electronics, where information flows most freely and thus most quickly to those who can use it.

If Washington's embarrassment at the latest round of spy games prompts new bureaucratic controls in government and industry, the Soviets will indeed have scored a victory.